

Guadalupe Mountains National Park: An Overview

Much of what we now call the Guadalupe Mountains, located in West Texas, are the fossil remains of algae, calcareous sponges and other ancient lime-secreting marine organisms. Deposited and compressed over eons of time at the bottom of a Permian Age sea, the tiny creatures formed an offshore reef. Covered with mineral salts and sediment, born from the remnants of the 1800-foot thick reef, the Guadalupe Mountains are an exposed part of the 400-mile long Capitan Reef.

Uneven tectonic mountain building pushed parts of the reef up and out of the Permian sea bed that once stretched into the State of Chihuahua in Mexico, and reached as far as Kansas and Oklahoma, covering parts of Texas and New Mexico. Other pieces of the reef exposed today are the Apache Mountains and the Glass Mountains.

Chihuahuan Desert plains surround Guadalupe Mountains National Park. Summer time temperatures above 90°F do not deter an abundance of desert plants and animals that have adapted to the 10 – 20 inches and less of rain that falls annually on the desert floor. The desert's agave, walking-stick cholla, prickly pear cactus, sotol, snakes, lizards, coyote and mule deer thrive with little water.

Steep cliffs and mild temperatures make the canyons of Guadalupe Mountains National Park a haven for a wide variety of animals and plants. McKittrick Canyon, often called *the most beautiful place in Texas*, lies between the Chihuahuan Desert floor and the Guadalupe Mountain highlands. Its location affords the lands within its walls a diverse blend of desert, woodland and mountain highland life. A unique mix of prickly pear cactus, agave, willow, Texas walnuts and madrones, alligator junipers and ponderosa pines call the canyon home. Velvet ash, bigtooth maple and gray oak line the banks of McKittrick Canyon's spring-fed stream. Green leafed banks turn to yellow, red and orange in the fall as hardwood leaves change color. Animal life runs from jackrabbit to fox, mountain lion, elk, mule deer and other large game animals.

Soft-wooded aspen, Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine and southwestern white-pine fill the Bowl -- a 2-mile wide depression at the top of the 8,000 foot high Guadalupe Mountains peaks. The Bowl represents the most wooded part of what is left of a thick conifer forest that dominated the high country of the Guadalupe Mountains 15,000 years ago. The exotic denizens of the ancient forest include peregrine falcons, golden eagles, black bears, mountain lions, mule deer, raccoons, wild turkeys, vultures and elk. Hunted to extinction in the 1900s, elk imported from the Dakotas and Wyoming have grown to a heard of 50 to 70 today.

The land that is now known as Guadalupe Mountains National Park was the home to ancient American Indians, the Mogollon people, and later the Mescalero Apache.

The Nde, or the Mescalero Apache, made the most recent and lasting impression. Until the 1800s, the Mescalero were the rulers and protectors of the mountain range. They lived and thrived on its lush vegetation and abundant game.

Explorers and pioneers, the settlers of the American West, changed the countryside. The conflict of cultures resulted in a military campaign by the United States Army against the Nde that lasted more than thirty years. By 1880, the Nde had been driven from the Guadalupe.

Army campaigns against the original settlers and the rugged terrain did not deter the Butterfield Stage Line from making regular runs through the mountain passes. Park visitors can visit the ruins of the Pinery Stagecoach Station – a remnant of the first transcontinental stagecoach service in the United States.

In 1959, Wallace Pratt donated land he had purchased in the 1930s to the National Park Service. After purchasing land from J.C. Hunter in 1972, Congress created the Guadalupe Mountains National Park. Today, hikers, campers, researchers and day visitors spend quality time in all three of the Guadalupe Mountains geographical zones – the desert, the canyons and the highlands.